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ABSTRACT

Over one-half of the Finnish elementary school system has always been comprised of one to two teacher schools, and this bulletin contains two papers dealing with those small school systems. "The Finnish School System and Small Schools" by Pekka Silventoinen describes the conditions that created Finland's predominantly small school systems and the population shifts and birth rate trends that are causing many small schools to close (2070 have been closed thus far). Preservation of schools in sparsely populated areas is considered a better solution than centralization of school systems in population agglomerates, and the paper describes measures being taken to preserve small schools. Instruction in small schools is carried out in combined grades and "Development of Combined Grade Instruction" by Reijo Laukkanen presents statistics describing the system and discusses some of the most central problems of developing instruction for combined grades. "Period" instruction of modern subjects often necessitates juxtaposition of usual study sequence, and experiments designed to correct some of the problems in period instruction are described. Advantages and disadvantages of combining grades are discussed along with the special demands made on teachers and the materials they use. (DS)

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SMALL SCHOOLS AND COMBINED GRADES IN FINLAND

Editor:
Asta Pietilä

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FOREWORD

Small schools are characteristic to the Finnish school system. The preservation of schools in sparsely populated areas has been considered a better solution than the centralization of school services only in population agglomerates. Unnecessary closing up of small schools has been slowed down in Finland by lowering the minimum number of pupils justifying state financial aid in 1-2 teacher schools.

Instruction in small schools is carried out in combined grades, where there are pupils from different grade levels taught by the same teacher. In a combined grade the instruction of modern subjects is carried out periodically. An attempt to solve problems in this field is made by experiments directed by the National Board of General Education.

This publication deals with the position of comprehensive school lower level schools and the development of instruction in them in Finland.

In the first article bureau director Pekka Silventoinen from the School Bureau, National Board of General Education deals with the problems concerning small schools. In the second article chief inspector Reijo Laukkanen from the Bureau of Research and Development, National Board of General Education throws light on the most central problems of developing instruction in combined grades.

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THE FINNISH SCHOOL SYSTEM AND SMALL SCHOOLS

Pekka Silventoinen

1. The structure of the Finnish school system

The Finnish school system is typically based on small schools. For example about one half of our elementary schools have always been 1-2 teacher schools. This is primarily a result of our population structure, geographical factors and traffic conditions. Among geographical factors developing sparse population should be mentioned our numerous water-chains. On account of sparse population, geographical obstacles and insufficient traffic conditions a large amount of schools, if compared with the number of inhabitants, has been founded in Finland and their average size has thus from the very beginning been very small.

In addition to the before mentioned factors the number of school units is naturally influenced by the number of school-aged children. National age-group fluctuations affect more clearly and immediately the amount of school units in sparsely populated areas than in population agglomerates. When for instance the amount of pupils grows pupils can flexibly be divided into different schools in population agglomerates without increasing the number of school units. There do not exist corresponding possibilities in sparsely populated areas. In order that the great age-groups born in the 1940's could be educated new schools had to be founded in the country partly because there were no other alternatives. On account of population structure and traffic conditions in those days a significant part of the new schools were 1-2 teacher schools. On the other hand decrease in pupil numbers affects most rapidly the amount of small schools. In large schools, when student numbers decrease, teacher positions can be done away with without any risk of endangering the

existence of the school itself. This kind of flexible system does not exist in small schools, but a minor decrease in student numbers can absolutely lead to the closing up of the shool in question.

2. Closing up of schools in Finland

Up to this point 2070 schools have been closed in Finland. This has primarily been caused by the decrease in birth rate, moving, factors related to our school system, building situation and the improvement of traffic conditions.

Age-groups have decreased to a great extent since the so-called great age-groups of the 1940's. In 1948 the birth rate was highest, 108 000 children (28 per cent of the total population). Since 1948 birth rate decreased evenly until 1973, when only 56 000 children were born (12 per cent of our total population).

Simultaneously with the decrease of birth rate after the great age-groups of the 1940's, our population structure has changed so that sparsely populated have lost their population. Those who have moved have been mostly in working age or people who have just reached working age. This results in the decrease of pupil numbers in elementary schools and lower levels of the comprehensive school. Simultaneously with school building caused by the great age-groups of the post war period, the Law on Compulsory Education was also carried into effect in sparsely populated areas. The powerful growth in pupil numbers led to a school network, which surpassed standards numberwise. The temporary need for school rooms was partly compensated by founding schools in rented accommodations, and these schools were first closed after pupil numbers decreased.

Mainly a lower level school within the comprehensive school system is closed when its pupil number goes below the minimum required if the other teacher position is to be retained. The combining of schools to an extent that has been the case so far, has been possible because of improvement in roadnetwork and increase in the number of automobiles. That is why municipalities have rather closed 2-teacher schools, when the number of pupils has went below the minimum, than continued school work with the help of only one teacher.

Table 1 presents the number of schools that have been closed during 1967-75. As seen in the table the yearly closing up of schools has been quite steady until the term 1972-73 when the closing up was decreased by changes in regulations.

TABLE 1. Closed (Finnish speaking) elementary schools and lower levels of the comprehensive school in municipalities, incorporated villages and towns during years 1967-75

Closed schools	1967-68	1968-69	1969-70	1970-71	1971-72	1972-73	1973-74	1974-75	1975-76	Total
In municipalities	242	188	224	197	68	20	27	18	22	1006
In incorporated villa-	7	8	3	4	2	2	6	1	1	34
In towns	2	10	3	7	3	10	3	4	2	44
	251	206	230	208	73	32	36	23	25	1084

3. The future of small schools

A considerable part of the above-explained factors, which have so far led to closing up of schools, will have a similar effect in the years to come. The slight increase of birth rate, which

has taken place during the last few years, will not increase the number of pupils in sparsely populated areas, but the increase will affect pupil amounts in population agglomerates as a result of changes in population structures. Furthermore moving will cause decrease in the population and pupil numbers in sparsely populated areas. The decrease of age-groups in sparsely populated areas is greater than the effects of the 1971 decision on pupil minimums in a school.

According to prognostics the number of 7-15-year olds in 1975-82 will go down by 106 000 pupils and by 1985 the decrease will be 113 000 pupils. The relative decrease is 15.7 per cent and 16.7 per cent respectively. Pupil numbers will go down most significantly in the provinces of sparsely populated areas.

A work group on the situation of small schools set up by the Ministry of Education made a survey covering the entire country, where on the municipal level an attempt was made to clarify the stability of small schools from 1975 to 1983. According to the survey 671 small schools (that is almost one half of our small schools) would be closed by the school term 1982-83. The small schools to be closed would have 20 or less pupils.

4. Measures to be taken to maintain small schools

The importance of schools from the point of view of society does not restrict to education and the school-aged population, but school brings about other activities as well. School accomodations and equipment are primarily used in youth-, culture-, and organization activities. The closing up of a school can without exception be considered as decrease in the social services in the society.

Even though a functioning school has besides its actual task some other tasks, the maintaining of a school is practically always solved on the basis of important criteria from the point of view of the school only. As regards pupils, the optimal school network and appropriate social structures, decisions to maintain a school should be made according to local conditions. Thus the minimum number of pupils could vary according to conditions and other factors affecting the decision could also be taken into consideration. In practise this would probably lead to personnel needs and expenditure development, which could not easily be foreseen or manouvered. This being the case now and in the future, the minimum number of pupils in 1-2 teacher schools is the factor according to which a school is closed up.

The before mentioned work group set up by the Ministry of Education stated in their report that while pupil numbers constantly decrease, we should primarily attempt to maintain 2-teacher lower level schools in sparsely populated municipalities. Areas requiring these kinds of special measures should include all municipalities that have less than 10 people living on a square kilometer. These municipalities are such as are located in sparsely populated provinces i.e. provinces where pupil numbers are going to decrease drastically. Island municipalities should be considered sparsely populated dependless of their population density. On the other hand a school in another municipality can be compared with sparsely populated ares, where the distance to the nearest school (in the same language area) is more than 10 kilometers as measured by the shortest road. The work group put forward a proposal to rectify State aid regulations so that in cases like the above mentioned a 2-teacher school could be maintained if there are 12 pupils and a 1-teacher school with only 6 pupils. A 2-teacher school could be maintained with less than 12 pupils for three years if there are at least 8 pupils. The Cabinet passed a statute in 1977 by which the work group's proposals were carried out.

In summary of the above it can be stated that the implementation of the said proposal would eliminate the closing up

or becoming 1-teacher schools of 240 schools. In sparsely populated areas 241 schools would nevertheless be closed according to the new State aid regulations. This number is quite high considering that it affects the school and cultural services of the most sparsely populated areas.

Source: Report of the work group on small schools, Ministry of Education, Helsinki December 10th 1976

DEVELOPMENT OF COMBINED GRADE INSTRUCTION IN FINLAND

Reijo Laukkanen

1. What is a combined grade?

A considerable part of basic grades in the lower levels of Finnish comprehensive schools are combined grades. The definition of a combined grade is that it is a basic grade with pupils from more than one grade-level. Most of our combined grades are in small schools in sparsely populated areas. 89 per cent of all combined grades during the school year 1976-77 were in 1-3 teacher schools. Table 1 shows the development of the number of school units during school years 1970-71.....1976-77.

TABLE 1. Development of the number of small school units in the 1970's

Number of teachers in the school	1970-71 f	%	1972-73 f	%	1974-75 f	%	1976-77 f	%
1	118	2,6	63	1,5	46	1,5	33	0,8
2	2351	52,6	1984	47,6	1774	43,7	1682	42,1
3	1009	22,6	1063	25,5	1098	27,0	1094	27,4
4-	992	22,2	1062	25,5	1145	28,2	1187	29,7
Total	4470		4172		4063		3996	

If the number of 1-3 teacher school units is compared with the total of all school units, the following conclusions can be drawn (Table 2):

TABLE 2. The percentage of small lower level school units in the total number of all lower level school units

1970-71	1972-73	1974-75	1976-77
77,8 %	74,5 %	71,8 %	70,3 %

There are combined grades in all 5-teacher and smaller schools if there simultaneously are pupils in all grade levels. However, there can temporarily be combined grades for one school year even in large schools. For example in 1975-76 there were 127 combined grades in 8-10-teacher schools. In schools with more than 10 teachers there were 77 combined grades in all, and majority of these existed in the provinces of Häme, Turku & Pori and Uusimaa, i.e. in the southern and south-western parts of Finland. Such temporary combined grades must be formed when the maximum number of pupils has been placed in a basic grade, and it is not possible to form a new basic grade from the pupils left over. During the school year 1976-77 there were in all 808 combined grades in schools with more than 3 teachers.

The structure of combined grades can vary to a great extent. They can be either permanent or temporary; large or small; normal or exceptional as regards their composition. All these factors affect the arrangement of instruction. Table 3 presents the most common types of combined grades.

TABLE 3. The most common types of combined grades during 1977-78.

Type of combined grade	Portion of all combined grades (%)	Portion of combined grades in 1-3 teacher schools (%)
1.-2.	37,8	89,5
3.-4.	23,0	84,6
5.-6.	18,0	83,9
3.-6.	13,8	99,9
1.-6.	0,3	100,0
Others	7,1	80,4

The most common combined grades are grades 1-2, 3-4 and 5-6. Next comes the typical 3-4 combined grade in a 2-teacher school whose instruction seems to be most difficult to arrange, because the grade includes pupils from four grade levels. A combined 1-6 grade in a 1-teacher school seems to be very rare in Finland. As late as in the 1950's there were more than a thousand 1-teacher schools. The instructional problems in

these schools have been so great that we have almost entirely got rid of them. In 1976-77 there were only 33 1-teacher schools.

The type of a combined grade is mostly determined directly by the size of the school. The teacher in a 1-teacher school teaches grades 1-6. In a 2-teacher school one teacher teaches grades 1-2 and the other grades 3-4. In a 3-teacher school one teacher has grades 1-2, the other grades 3-4 and the third teacher grades 5-6.

The before mentioned normal combined grade types are the types mostly in use. However to a greater extent we have to form basic grades, where grade levels must be formed contrary to these principles. These cover for example grades 4-5; 2-3 or such combined grades that have no pupils from a grade-level e.g. combined grades with pupils from grade-level 2 and 4 and no pupils from grade-level 3. A combined grade 4-6 or 3-5 is possible in a 2-teacher school, where there are no pupils from some age groups. Combined grades 1-3 and 4-6 are possible as well in a 2-teacher school.

Age groups in a combined grade can be of different size. This restricts the use of different teaching methods to a certain extent. Also the total number of pupils in a combined grade sets limits to the selection of teaching methods. During the school year 1976-77 the average number of pupils was 14 in 1-3 teacher schools, whereas the average number of pupils in 4-teacher schools or even bigger schools was 25. In 61,7 per cent of the last mentioned combined grades (N=808) the number of pupils was 25 or more, and 54 of these combined grades had 33 or more pupils.

Of all lower-level basic grades 41,9 per cent were combined grades during the school year 1976-77. Of all lower-level pupils 28,9 per cent studied in a combined grade. Table 4 presents the percentage of combined grades and combined grade pupils in each province (Cf. also the affixed map 1).

TABLE 4. The percentage of combined grades and combined grade pupils in the provinces during 1976-77.

Province	Percentage of combined grades	Percentage of combined grade pupils
The province of Häme	28,2	18,8
" of Central Finland	43,0	28,8
" of Kuopio	49,7	33,1
" of Kyme	34,1	24,1
" of Lapland	56,1	39,3
" of Mikkeli	55,6	41,1
" of Oulu	53,7	37,0
" of North Carelia	62,4	44,9
" of Turku and Pori	40,7	29,3
" of Uusimaa	20,8	15,1
" of Vaasa	54,1	42,5

The table shows that the amount of combined grades is greatest in the provinces of Eastern and Northern Finland (cf. the affixed map).

2. Teaching arrangements in combined grades

Teaching in a combined grade takes place either according to grade-levels or in study groups in periods. Instruction according to grade-levels means that every grade-level within a combined grade studies the syllabi indicated in its curriculum. For example in mathematics the lower grade (3^{rd} grade) in a combined grade follows the curriculum of the 3^{rd} grade and the upper grade (grade 4) follows the 4^{th} grade curriculum. Instruction is given in the same order as in a separate grade.

Period instruction is given in geography, biology, civics, environmental studies, history and religion. For period instruction the combined grade is divided into study groups. Each study group

includes pupils from two grade-levels. Thus from a combined grade including pupils from grade-levels 3-6 the teacher forms two study groups i.e. a group with pupils from grade-levels 3 and 4 and a group with pupils from grade-levels 5 and 6. A combined grade formed of pupils from two grade-levels (e.g. 3-4) is as such a study group. Table 5 describes the principles of period instruction.

TABLE 5. The period instruction system of modern subjects (indicated in the above text)

Combined grade or study group	Period instruction course	Curriculum syllabi followed from grade	E.g. during the school year
1.-2.	1.	1	1976-77
1.-2.	2.	2	1977-78
3.-4.	1.	3	1978-79
3.-4.	2.	4	1979-80
5.-6.	1.	5	1980-81
5.-6.	2.	6	1981-82

Combined grades do not have a curriculum of their own, but they follow the same curriculum as other basic grades. The curriculum follows the same line of progress as an "ordinary" grade. Guidelines have been given for the organisation of period instruction and they include e.g. that the first period follows the curriculum of the lower grade-level and the second period follows the curriculum of the higher grade-level. For example a combined grade 3-4 follows during the first year the curriculum of grade 3 and during the second year the curriculum of grade 4. The National Board of General Education has given instructions for the time-tabelling of period instruction according to which all Finnish combined grades study each year according to the same period system.

Certain problems arise as period instruction is used; these include e.g. the following:

(1) Every other age-group of pupils studies matters in a wrong order. In history this problem is acute. History studies are started on the 5th grade. The curriculum covers the history of mankind as far as the 16th century.

The 6th grade curriculum proceeds from the 16th century. In period instruction those pupils who begin history studies during the second period (move to 5th grade e.g. during the school year 1977-78) start with the events of the 16th century. During the following school year these pupils study the syllabus covering the early days up till the 16th century. This kind of teaching arrangement certainly affects both studying and teaching.

(2) Period instruction cannot be applied to all combined grades. These include all grades that cannot be divided into study groups indicated in Table 5.

(3) There may become gaps in pupils' studies e.g. a pupil, who has started his studies in a lower study group within a combined grade, does not at all receive instruction in first period subjects in case he moves to a separate grade after he has studied the syllabi of the second period in a combined grade. Instead he studies the syllabi of the second period in two consecutive years. Correspondingly a separate grade pupil has problems when he moves to a combined grade. If a separate grade pupil after the 3rd grade moves to a combined grade when it follows the first period syllabus, the pupil must study for the second time the syllabi of the 3rd grade in all period instruction subjects, and the syllabi of the 4th grade are not studied at all.

3. Propositions for solving the problems of period instruction

Experiments on combined grade instruction have been carried out since 1972. During the experiments teaching methods and curricular solutions pertaining to school subjects have been developed. Experiments on removing problems caused by period instruction constitute an integral part of combined grade experimentation.

3.1. Four period instruction experiment

Especially to develop instruction in a 2-teacher school's combined grade 3-6 the curricula of modern subjects were arranged into four' periods instead of two. The experiment was started in 1974-75. During the experiment the teacher taught the same syllabi to the entire combined grade 3-6 during the same lesson. Geography may serve as an example. In separate grades the geography of Finland, Scandinavia, Europe and other continents is studied during successive years. During the experiment the geography instruction of all these areas was arranged during all four periods. During each period these areas were studied from a different point of view. And the pupils' age level was taken into consideration.

Within the two period system when the teacher teaches geography to 3-4 graders, 5-6 graders study another subject (e.g. mother tongue) independently. The four period system in a 2-teacher 3-6 combined grade, had its advantages with regard to the teacher; he could concentrate on teaching only one subject at a time. The arrangement does not, however, remove the before mentioned difficulties in progress on the level of an individual pupil, especially, because it was not considered adequate to arrange instruction in separate grades according to the four period system.

3.2. The grade-level experiment

After the four period system was found problematic, the curriculum experiment was focused on finding out whether instruction on the various grade-levels within a combined grade could be carried out in the same way as is done in separate grades.

The aim of the experiment was to rearrange the syllabi in the comprehensive school curriculum so that the said curriculum could as well be followed in both separate and combined grades. This would mean that the pupils of each grade-level in the combined grade were taught the same syllabi

as the pupils in a separate grade. This arrangement would make the period instruction system unnecessary. Furthermore the purpose of the experiment was to find out whether it would be possible to use the same curriculum in all types of combined grades. The experiment was started in 1975-76.

Within the grade-level system of instruction each grade studies its own syllabi. The syllabi of different grades have been selected from the curriculum so that they constitute a common subject area to the entire combined grade, and instruction on this common area is carried out during the same lesson. Because e.g. in a combined 3-6 grade the teacher has to teach four grade-levels during the same lesson, special attention has to be paid to teaching materials that make independent study possible. The material for each grade level within the combined grade should be well integrated with the common subject area to be taught. In the four period instruction system attention was paid to teaching the entire combined grade on a yearly basis and in the grade-level solution teaching varied according to grade-level during each school year. Subject areas are, however, the same every school year. Thus pupils from each grade-level study according to a curriculum written for their age-group.

This experiment has been carried out since 1975 in six places. One grade at a time adopts the grade-level instruction system. Final conclusions on the importance of the experiment will be drawn after the experiment ends in 1979.

4. Instructional possibilities in combined grades

Research on combined grade instruction in Finland and elsewhere is scarce. Furthermore research results seem to nullify each other. Some studies on school achievement in combined vs. separate grades show differences in favour of separate grades, some studies on the other hand show that pupils' school achievement in combined grades is better. Pedagogical experience shows, however, that combined grade instruction increases the teacher's work load. There are no quiet moments in the class from the point of view of the

teacher. The overall qualities of a combined grade bring about certain advantages to study. These advantages are generally appreciated by teachers. The small size of a combined grade compensates many instructional difficulties. Agewise heterogenous groups are natural bodies where the members educate each other. The older pupils in a combined grade may function as instructors to the younger ones.

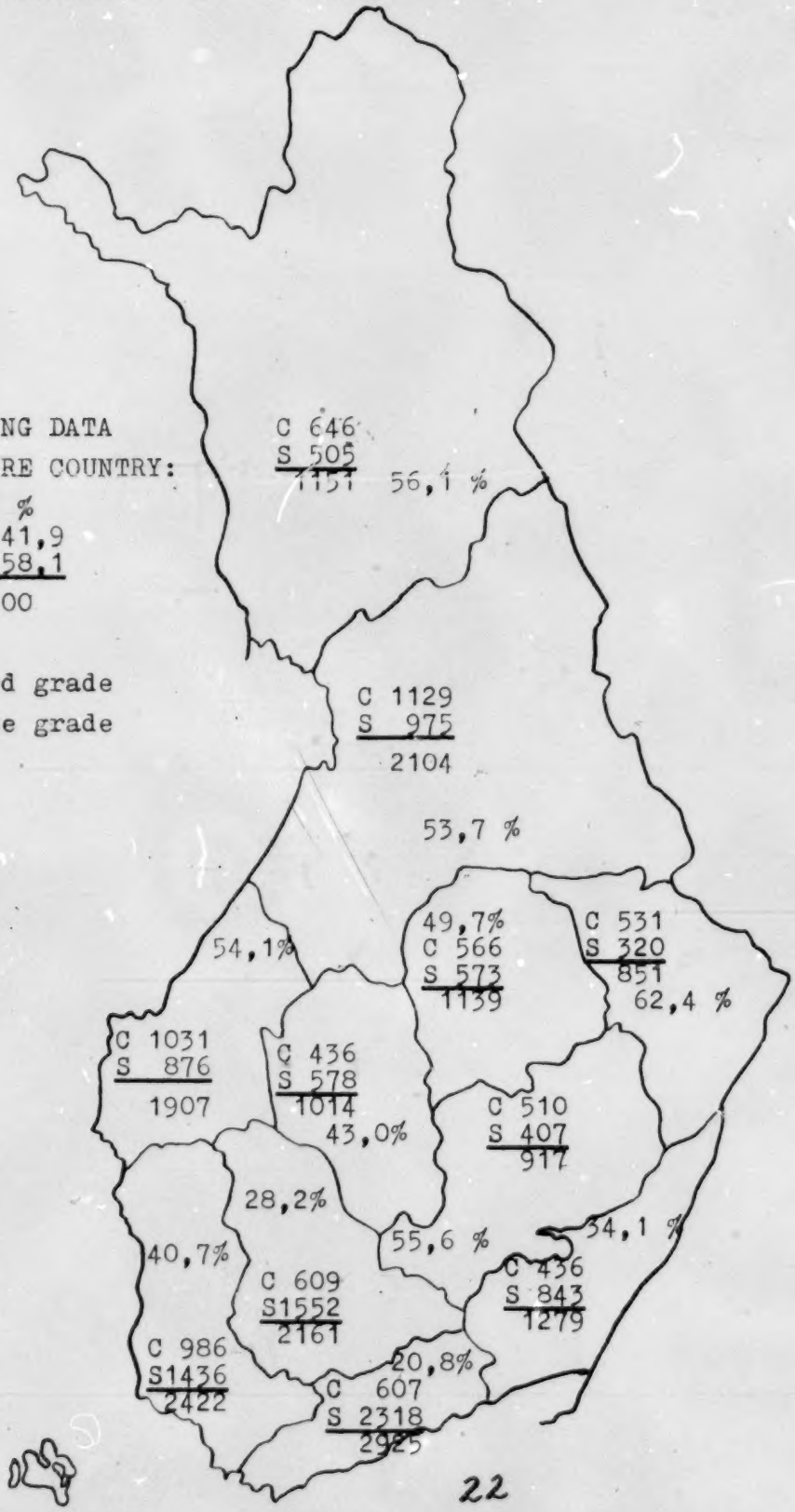
The last mentioned quality of a combined grade has traditionally been taken advantage of in instruction. To improve instruction in small schools small- and big group experiments were organized in school years 1973-74, and 1974-75 in some 2-and 3-teacher lower level comprehensive schools. A special aim of the experiment was to find ways to solve problems dealing with remedial instruction in small schools. The arrangement of remedial instruction in small schools of sparsely populated areas is hampered by the small numbers of teachers and pupil transportations which are used by majority of small school pupils. During the experiment groups in a 2-teacher school were formed contrary to normal basic grade division temporarily so that one teacher taught 1-5 pupils in a small group and the other taught the remaining pupils in a "big group" (which was relatively small however). Several small groups could be formed in a 2-teacher school where upper level pupils were used as auxiliary teachers. Along the experiment flexible teaching arrangements in small schools were acquired, as instruction groups could be formed in a manner best suited to the situation in question. This arrangement was considered so succesful that the National Board of General Education gave a permission to all 2- and 3-teacher schools to deviate during the school year 1977-78 from the basic grade grouping, if necessary, according the lines explained above. Information on the general feasibility of the system will be collected during this school year after which period a decision will be made whether permanent rules and regulations about the system could be given.

Combined grade studying is pupil-centered. Combined grade teachers should especially follow the development of pupils' study habits, especially the prerequisites for independent work. Independence is expected of a combined grade pupil particularly

because majority of studying takes place in the form of so-called silent studying, i.e. independently while the teacher gives instructions to pupils from another grade-level. It should perhaps be emphasized that independent work does not mean unguided study.

The development of combined grade instruction makes great demands especially on the development of materials. Materials should be explicit, readable, unambiguous and coherent. They should include elements, which help adopting the principles of auto-instructional materials, lead to critical thinking and develop an evaluative approach in the pupil. Primarily emphasis should be placed on the development of an internal evaluation system in the material.

MAP 1. THE PERCENTAGE OF BASIC INSTRUCTION GROUPS IN COMBINED GRADES OF ALL LOWER LEVEL BASIC INSTRUCTION GROUPS IN EACH PROVINCE



CORRESPONDING DATA ON THE ENTIRE COUNTRY:

	f	%
C	7487	41,9
S	10383	58,1
	17870	100

C = combined grade
S = separate grade

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